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“THE IRON WOMAN”

BY MARY TAPPAN WRIGHT

MRS. DELAND'S last book is so much the natural sequence of her earlier work that there is danger of losing sight of its greater significance. Whether the author's choice of a larger scheme was conscious or unconscious, it remains true that *The Iron Woman* is her greatest effort and that she has succeeded, beyond all cavil, in accomplishing what she set out to do. This success has been brought about through so much reserve and restraint that there is almost a feeling of hesitation in noticing it. Every consideration has been laid aside but that of presenting the subject clearly and truthfully, and the style has become a crystal medium through which we are enabled to watch living characters moving, unconscious of observation, through actual scenes. The smoky, lurid Mercer of forty years ago is as true to its time as if it were a town of yesterday; and those who have stopped, as David did, on its reverberating, covered bridge to look down “at the slow, turbid river rolling below” cannot be too grateful that the picture has been preserved to them.

“He stood there a long time leaning on the hand-rail. On the dun surface a sheen of oil gathered, and spread, and gathered again. He could hear the wash of the current, and in the railing under his hand he felt the old wooden structure thrill and quiver in the constant surge of water against the pier below him. The sun, a blood-red disk, was slipping into the deepening haze, and on either side of the river the city was darkening into dusk. All along the shore lights were pricking out of the twilight and sending wavering shafts down into the water. The coiling smoke from furnace chimneys lay level and almost motionless in the still air; sometimes it was shot with sparks, or showed, on its bellying black curves, red gleams from the hidden fires below.”

This and many another beautiful description throughout the book is as much a part of its period as is the Iron Woman herself. Before her rough, whirling vitality all the

other characters are subordinated with a self-denying skill that absolutely hides its own perfection; but the ineffective gentility of Cherry Pie, the colorless loyalty of Nannie, and the barking fidelity of Mr. Ferguson belong distinctly to their time and their locality, as do the tentative gaiety of Helena Richie, the egoistic independence of David, the lazy "culture" of Blair, and even the turbulence of that flame, Elizabeth—burning away her own dross, finching, flickering, veering, but bright to the end. Together, without one jarring discrepancy, they take their places in our memories with the things that indisputably have been; an invaluable record of a period in the life of our Middle States that has passed away, not to return.

The Iron Town of to-day is at once more sordid and less homely than it was in the late sixties and early seventies, and the changes, spiritual and material, that have been wrought in the course of nearly half a century make the thought of living in the midst of the Latins and Slavs who now form so large a portion of the population of a twentieth-century Mercer almost inconceivable; but the Iron Woman, not a woman of iron, but the head of the great Maitland Works, lives on, after her husband's death, with her son and stepdaughter, in the old Maitland house "pressed upon by the yards of the Maitland Works and almost islanded by railroad tracks." Two other children—Elizabeth Ferguson, the niece of Robert Ferguson, Mrs. Maitland's manager; and David Richie, the adopted son of Mrs. Helena Richie, Robert Ferguson's tenant and neighbor—are companions of the little Maitlands, and all four of them are taught by Miss White, Elizabeth's governess, at the manager's house, until they have outgrown her inefficient tutelage, when the girls are sent to a day-school and the boys go away to prepare for college. Blair Maitland, whenever he comes home, is made acutely miserable by the ugliness of his surroundings. He "found everything hideous, or vulgar, or uncomfortable, and he said so to Nannie"—his sister—"with a violence that betrayed real suffering. For it is suffering when the young creature finds itself ashamed of either father or mother." And Blair was not only ashamed, but bitterly annoyed, by the careless coarseness of his mother's household, the rudeness of her manner, and the neglect of her person. His "conventionality was insulted at every turn; his love of beauty was outraged. As

a result, a wall was slowly built between the mother and son.” Nothing is spared us in the delineation of the Iron Woman. We can almost see her with Blair’s unloving eyes—almost, but not quite; for as she walks about her dreary house, knitting baby socks and trailing her ball of pink yarn behind her, we see her softened and lovable, with a heart of gold, and we recognize with keen pleasure the unequalled skill and justice in Mrs. Deland’s account of the inevitable clash between these warring temperaments.

The companionship of the children is also most delightfully described. Their quarrels, their love-affairs, their ambitions, are told with perfect sympathy and charming humor. Their doings and the elderly friendship that grows between Mr. Ferguson and Mrs. Richie give the story a lightness and cheer that completely cloaks its grim and thorny reality. Even Elizabeth’s hot, ungoverned outbursts of anger seem less a menace than an amusing, childish waywardness, and we overlook them because of her quick repentance and savage penance. There is nothing in Elizabeth of Tattycoram’s harsh, prolonged perversity, nor of Lady Deadlock’s manufactured pride and temper; in literature she appears as a fresh, unhackneyed variant of the vehement character, and Mrs. Deland has given her to us with all her defects and qualities so real, so entirely convincing, that we do not for a moment question the truth of her mental process when she makes a runaway marriage with Blair Maitland, whom she does not love because of a violent fit of rage with her *fiancé*, David Richie, whom she does.

This treachery of Blair’s is the final enlightenment of his mother. From his babyhood up she has given him everything that he has asked for; he does not know the meaning of “no.” To want is to have; to desire is to take. Blaming herself bitterly, Mrs. Maitland, with characteristic directness, determines to save her son from her own mistakes.

... “I think that what I am going to do will cure you. If it doesn’t, God knows what will become of you! . . . You can work, or you can starve. Or,” she added simply, ‘you can beg. You have begged practically all your life, thanks to me.’”

... “Now, her iron will, melted by the fires of love, was seething and glowing, dazzlingly bright in the white heat of complete self-renunciation; it was ready to be poured into a torturing mold to make a tool with which he might save his soul! But no spark of understanding

came into his angry eyes. She did not pause for that; his agreement was a secondary matter. The habit of success made her believe that she could achieve the impossible—namely, save a man's soul in spite of himself; 'make,' as she had told Robert Ferguson, 'a man of her son.' She would have been glad to have his agreement, but she would not wait for it.

"Blair listened in absolute silence. 'Do I understand,' he said, when she had finished, 'that you mean to disinherit me?'

"'I mean to give you the finest inheritance a young man can have: *the necessity for work!*'"

To this decision, in her last struggle for Blair's redemption, Mrs. Maitland holds unrelentingly. In her new will Blair is left with an income barely sufficient for his needs. At the same time she earnestly desires "to even things up with David," and she begins at once to put by money for the endowment of a hospital near the Works, of which David is to be trustee; but an accident occurs before she has taken the necessary measures to safeguard her intention. In a last heroic fight for life she repudiates bed as "a place to die in," and, lying in the dining-room, propped up with cushions, she sends her stepdaughter for a certificate of deposit which she had taken from the bank the day of the accident. Half delirious, she makes out the certificate to Blair Maitland, but she dies before she is able to sign it. Nannie, who is an unusually clever copyist and who firmly believes that her stepmother intended to sign the certificate, forges Mrs. Maitland's name, and Blair accepts the money. Nannie's act is discovered, the money is returned to the estate, and Nannie announces her intention of giving an equivalent sum to Blair out of her own inheritance.

"Then Elizabeth asked her question: 'And when you get the principal, what will you do with it?'

"'Invest it; pretty tough, isn't it, when you think what I ought to have had?'

"'And when,' said Elizabeth, very softly, 'will you build the hospital?'

But this Blair refuses to do.

"'It is David's money,' Elizabeth says. 'You took his wife. Now you are taking his money. . . . You can't keep both of them.'"

And when Blair persists, Elizabeth, unable to endure this last disgrace, flies to David. She is followed by Mrs. Richie, who, before it is too late, persuades her to return to her husband; but Elizabeth and David were hard to convince; they belonged to a generation for whom the rights of the individual shone with an appalling splendor, and before she

can persuade them to part Mrs. Richie is driven to disclose the deplorable secret of her own life's shipwreck.

In time Blair is shamed into offering Elizabeth her release; but, although there is a strong hint that she may not accept it, we are left uncertain as to her last decision.

It is impossible in a meager and almost misleading outline to give any impression of the convincing truthfulness of this book. All the events of the story grow, one from the other, in an irrefutable sequence; and yet the threads that in *The Awakening of Helena Richie* seemed to be left more or less at loose ends are not here by any means drawn to a firm knot. The rare intention of this is beyond a doubt.

As ruthlessly as might the Iron Woman herself, Mrs. Deland has shown us the hideous havoc that anger and idleness can work; she makes clear that when we have sworn we must keep the vow even to our own hindrance; she causes us to see with our own eyes that there are better things than even a happy love, higher things than our own good, and in Elizabeth's possible submission to her loveless marriage with Blair gives that counsel of perfection toward which the whole tortured story of Helena Richie's sin and repentance leads the way.

No one can see Elizabeth settling down to her life with Blair with equanimity; but at the thought of her building up where she has torn away, and reaping in steadfast courage the harvest of her own sowing, something glows within us and in our hearts we would decorate her—for valor!

We cannot but hope that for Elizabeth and Blair

“ there shall succeed a faithful peace;
Beautiful friendship tried by sun and wind,
Durable from the daily dust of life.
And though with sadder, still with kinder eyes,
We shall behold all frailties, we shall haste
To pardon, and with mellowing minds to bless.”

And may Mrs. Deland tell us of it!

MARY TAPPAN WRIGHT.